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Quality Comptrollership: Let's Stop Crawling and Walk the Talk!

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Quality Air Force program began years ago. However, my experiences as both Director of Financial Management and Comptroller and Director of Quality Programs at the Ballistic Missile Organization led me to firmly believe we have only begun to make "quality" a way of life. Four areas for improvement stand out to me:

1. Documenting critical processes
2. Using metrics better
3. Sharing lessons learned
4. Empowering our people

While this is not a complete list of improvement areas for the FM community, these items offer large potential benefits relative to the investment required to address them. As we continue to adjust to a smaller force structure, we must work much smarter to keep up with mission demands. It's time to stop "crawling" along on our quality journey, and get up and walk!

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QUALITY COMPTROLLERSHIP--LET'S STOP CRAWLING AND WALK THE TALK!

__Introduction__. From October 1993 through May 1995, I served as both Director of Financial Management and Comptroller (FM) and Director of Quality Improvement (QI) at Detachment 10, Space and Missile Systems Center (Det 10, SMC--formerly the Ballistic Missile Organization-BMO) at Norton AFB, CA. When I arrived at the BMO in 1990, Norton AFB--our host base--was planning to close in March 1994. Congress directed that the BMO remain in San Bernardino after base closure since missile research and development was still going strong. At that time, the BMO had several active programs valued in the billions of dollars--which employed thousands. However, as the Berlin wall fell and the cold war ended, President Bush canceled the Small ICBM (the "Midgetman") and Peacekeeper Rail Garrison (mobile MX) programs. The Air Force subsequently decided to close the BMO in October 1995. "Quality" was tough to sell as hundreds faced unplanned and unwanted transfers or possibly, unemployment.

When I became comptroller, more than half of the BMO work force had been eliminated due to transfers and DOD personnel reduction programs; inbound employees were a distant memory. Many of my peers and subordinates were also "dual-hatted" in order to accomplish the mission with far fewer people. This was a unique opportunity for me: as QI, I led the Quality Air Force (QAF) charge for continuous improvement; as FM, I took my QI "prescriptions." During my tenure, I saw four specific areas with enormous improvement potential:

1. Documenting our critical processes
2. Improving our use of metrics
3. Sharing our lessons learned--"stealing good ideas from each other"
4. Empowering our people

I believe the FM community is still "crawling" along in our quality improvement efforts, and we can and must do much better. As we continue performing our mission with fewer and fewer people, we have no choice but to end "business as usual" and work a lot smarter. This paper offers my perspectives on how doing the above four things will help us successfully meet this challenge.

Documenting Key Processes. As QI, I touted the benefits of having checklists, flow charts, or other process documentation. They are necessary for developing useful metrics and greatly ease transfers of critical process ownership when people are reassigned. I consider a process critical when a breakdown leads to one or more of the following:

- Failure to accomplish the mission;
- Unhappy customers;
- Jeopardizing someone's career;
- Wasted taxpayer dollars; or
- Embarrassment for the team.

During my first year as comptroller, I became an even stronger believer in the enormous value of process documentation.

In the summer of 1994, two of my majors in key jobs retired. Due to our impending unit closure, replacements were out of the question. Thankfully, one major had developed "brain books" which described how he handled several of his key duties. Before leaving, he briefly reviewed the books with a GS-7 teammate who was assuming the responsibility for running the FM professional development program. Using these "brain books," she was expertly handling her FM teammates' requests for training or professional certification actions--less than a month later. I received nothing but high praise for her performance in these duties.

The other retiree, like most of us, never found the time to write down how he conducted business. To make things worse, he had not adequately prepared his successor for the increased responsibilities. The result was disaster. Within a month of his departure, I was summoned by his program director (BMO's senior colonel) who told me "the wheels were about to come off" in the major's old office. My staff and I scrambled to identify the problems and provided as much assistance to that office as we could. We were able to recover and restore the team's status, but it was something all of us would have preferred to avoid. Process documentation would certainly helped avoid this embarrassment, and is critical to implementing my next suggestion: using metrics better.

Improving use of metrics. In October 1993, FM had only one metric: customer satisfaction. However, it wasn't driving improvements. The most common customer complaint, from the commander on down, was late travel payments. Our travel pay support had transferred to Los Angeles AFB (80 miles away) as Norton closed, so customers used to quick reimbursement were upset. Many were paying travel bills before they got reimbursed, often finding errors in their settlements which required them to file supplemental vouchers to get fully reimbursed. I told my commander I would investigate; this required some objective data gathering.

Since we had no existing travel metric, we had to build one. I examined my last voucher to identify all the key steps in the process which resulted in my travel reimbursement. Then, my travel clerk, office manager, and I built a worksheet for travelers to complete after they were paid. For a month, my office manager logged data on each key step in the process. When she finally presented the aggregate results, the problem was clear: the average voucher sat in someone's "in" box for a week or more before it was computed and approved for payment.

With this data in hand, I visited the Los Angeles AFB comptroller and financial services officer (FSO). The FSO's internal data showed his staff averaged a one-day turnaround on travel vouchers. I showed him my data and asked him to research the problem. I'm not sure what he did, but complaints from my travelers evaporated almost immediately. After a few months of periodically checking vouchers to confirm the problem was fixed, my staff discontinued the travel metric. We stood ready to reinstitute it, but the problem never reappeared.

I have to admit this was one of those rare times when I used a metric to find and fix a problem. Unfortunately, "big picture" metrics like tracking obligation and expenditure rates never drove any of my decisions; our programs were very well-managed. Metrics development isn't easy; I found several of the proposed metrics I received from our command headquarters confusing. None seemed close to the ideal of a meaningful, easy to collect measurement which leaders can use to gauge the day-to-day health of their critical processes. There is hope, however.

I saw several areas where I think metrics would drive improvements:

1. **Rework**. One of my team's common complaints was about how many times financial documents had to be reaccomplished because of errors or changes in fund cites or other codes. Our personnel staff diligently tracks the number of performance reports and awards returned for corrections, along with reasons for those rejections. Common mistakes are made public and become primary targets of improvement efforts. We could do the same thing with key financial documents to ensure we do them right the first time.

2. **Process time**. In addition to tracking errors, we could track how long it takes to prepare financial documents. Time is money, and we can't afford to waste it as we reduce our staffs. Some FM office somewhere is the quickest to accurately complete purchase requests, fund cite authorizations, or other key documents. The trouble is, we may never know who they are. If I knew it took my staff twice as long to process Form 9s as the people at another base, we would be calling or visiting that location to find out how they do it!

3. **Office workload**. One of the toughest decisions leaders make is to reallocate personnel as workload changes. When these decisions are made, they are often viewed as subjective. During my early years at BMO, offices handling fewer, but large dollar, transactions sometimes had more budget analysts than offices handling many more, but smaller dollar, transactions. This was a real morale problem in my office. If we had an objective measure of workload, like the actual and forecast numbers of fund cite authorizations managed or purchase requests processed per week, we could avoid a "feast or famine" manning situation and take some of the politics out of personnel management.

These are just examples, but simple metrics such as these, properly used, would drive better business practices and facilitate my next suggestion: benchmarking.

<u>Benchmarking--"stealing" others' good ideas and practices</u>! While investigating the traveler complaints described earlier, I found that some of my customers commonly had errors or omissions in their travel vouchers. My staff suggested that many customers could really use a detailed checklist for completing vouchers. While they were capable of developing it themselves, my people were smart, looking to see if someone already had one we could "steal." Sure enough, the Los Angeles AFB FSO's travel staff had a very detailed document printed already; all we had to do is ask for one! We had copies out almost overnight.

Another example of a good "steal" was the work of a process action team (PAT) the BMO Quality Council chartered in late January 1993 by to evaluate suggestions for improving our awards and recognition program. A work force survey pointed out the need for a civilian recognition program similar to the military quarterly and annual awards. Before we built a program from scratch, one of my teammates found that nearby March AFB had implemented such a program. He got a copy of their operating procedures, which we tailored to fit our needs. On 31 March 1993--only two months after the first PAT meeting--the commander implemented this program. At the April Commander's Call, two civilians stood smiling alongside the military quarterly award recipients for the first time in recent BMO history.

Unfortunately, these were the exceptions, not the rule. At one off-site meeting with my staff, we discussed the key processes we had identified. I challenged them to call their counterparts at SMC or at other Air Force Materiel Command units before they built corresponding checklists or other desktop procedures. They came up empty. I first thought they just didn't call the right people, but during a later visit to SMC, I asked the FM staff if they had **any** "brain books" which documented how they performed key processes. I came up empty, too!

I'm sure my people spent hours or days documenting standard procedures that someone else had already written down. However, many people still think it's easier to "reinvent the wheel" than to find a counterpart who has built one already. Addressing this problem would help in the next area: empowerment.

Empowering your people. Empowerment is one of the most overused and misused terms in government today. Many leaders think it is simply giving up power--they are dead wrong! Power sharing is effective when--and only when--leaders know how to empower and followers are ready to accept their new authority. My QI staff teamed with the SMC QAF office to develop a handbook on empowerment. After an extensive literature search and consultations with empowerment experts in and out of government, we found seven characteristics common to empowered organizations:

1. **Knowledge**. Team members' training and experience ensures they understand how their roles and actions fit into the "big picture." Leaders mentor subordinates to handle increased authority.

2. **Skills**. Team members are technically competent and enjoy positive interpersonal relationships. Leaders ensure no one is given a task without the preparation and training necessary to perform it well.

3. **Structure**. Authority, responsibility, and accountability are well understood. Leaders have clearly explained any necessary boundaries; subordinates understand why they exist.

4. **Rewards**. Educated risk-taking is encouraged; successes are celebrated. Failures are not fatal, but used by leadership as learning opportunities. Recognition is appropriate and timely.

5. **Communications**. Everyone has relatively easy access to information necessary to make sound professional or personal decisions. Information flows freely up and down the organizational hierarchy.

6. **Support**. Leaders clearly stand behind their people. Employees are not "out on a limb"; they take educated risks and make ethical decisions knowing the "boss" will back them up even when things go wrong. Time isn't wasted "covering one's posterior."

7. **Character**. Leaders and team members have integrity and courage. They respect each other and accept responsibility for their actions. Leaders set high standards and lead by example. Trust and esprit de corps is high across the organization.

Detachment 10 was nearer this ideal than any other unit I've worked in. Yes, we had occasional problems and made mistakes. However, our commander stood behind us and we felt free to do our jobs to the best of our ability. The result: despite our impending closure, mission effectiveness and morale remained high.

There were several things I experimented with to empower my team members. Those which worked best for me:

1. **Improve communications**. When I came to FM, meetings between key leaders on the FM team were irregular; "FM Calls" for getting everyone together hadn't happened for years. I instituted weekly, informal gatherings for my leadership and quarterly FM Calls for the entire team. At the FM Calls, I reviewed our strategic plan which the leadership had prepared with me. I gave each team member a copy of the plan--and solicited their comments. Like my commander, I also used electronic mail to keep both leaders and subordinates informed about what was going on in our team and in the unit. A local climate survey showed that improving communications had enhanced my team's cohesiveness and esprit de corps.

2. **Recognize your top performers**. Recognizing people often takes too much work, and what gets through the bureaucracy is often untimely. I borrowed a program one of my colonels had used for his team and built informal FM quarterly awards. Nominations for "All Star Team," "Unsung Hero," etc., were hand-written on recipe cards; anyone on the team could submit them. Winners were chosen at the weekly FM staff meeting and received certificates at FM Calls and free lunch compliments of the commander at unit cookouts. Their names appeared in both the unit newsletter and on a sign outside the FM staff office. They loved it!

3. **Stand behind them--and make sure they know you are there**. Celebrating success with your people is easy. The real test comes when something has gone wrong. On the rare occasions when I discovered a well-intentioned subordinate had "messed up," I told my commander what the problem was, what I was doing about it, and that if he was to be angry with someone, that someone should be me. I knew that my people were doing their very best for me; I didn't deserve to lead them if I was going to leave them "out on a limb" when the going got tough. They, on the other hand, knew I stood ready to take the heat for their mistakes--and they worked very hard to make sure I didn't have to!

As you could imagine, this was an assignment I really hated to leave. However, I am joining the Phillips Laboratory team at Kirtland AFB, NM, where I will focus on these suggestions in helping the comptroller improve his quality program.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS. As QI, it was easy to dispense advice about improving my unit's operations. As FM, I found it impossible to do everything I would have liked in my QAF program. I'm sure my fellow comptrollers around the Air Force have also struggled on their quality journey. However, my experiences over the last two years taught me that we should by focus on the improvement areas with the greatest potential payoffs.

Better process documentation helps us keep critical processes under control and facilitates transferring ownership from one person to another. Better use of metrics gives us a set of gauges we can use to easily monitor the health of those processes. Improved lessons learned sharing helps us avoid "reinventing the wheel" and making mistakes others have already learned to prevent. People who are **properly** empowered can successfully meet practically any challenge; those who aren't are destined for failure and frustration. Those of us who "walk" the quality "talk" and build our teams around these concepts will be well-positioned to perform our missions more effectively while making life better for ourselves and our people. That's what Quality Air Force is all about.